DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 476 CG 017 308

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TITLE Training Teachers to Identify and Intervene with Abused Children.
SPONS AGENCY Emory Univ., Atlanta, Ga.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Child Abuse; Elementary Secondary Education; *Identification; *Inservice Teacher Education; Intervention; Research Reports; Teacher Improvement; *Teacher Role; Teachers; Teacher Workshops

ABSTRACT

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Training Teachers to Identify and Intervene with Abused Children

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Paper presented at the American Psychological Association
Los Angeles, CA.
August, 1983

Abstract

Teachers are a potentially helpful resource for abused children, but generally lack training in child abuse identification and intervention. Elementary and junior high school teachers (n=104) were surveyed concerning their abuse-related experience, knowledge and attitudes. Sixty-eight percent of the teachers reported 3 or fewer hours of education about child abuse and 62% reported no prior experience with abuse cases. Half of the teachers (n=51) were then randomly assigned to participate in a one-day training workshop on child abuse. Repeated measures analyses revealed that treatment teachers, compared to control teachers, increased in knowledge about child abuse and developed more sympathetic attitudes toward the abusive parent. A six-month follow-up using self-report data revealed no significant differences between groups in the number of cases of child abuse identified or reported. However, treatment teachers were significantly: 1) more likely to talk with individual students to determine if abuse was occuring, 2) more likely to give a class presentation on child abuse, 3) less likely to report the use of physical punishment in the classroom, and 4) more likely to discuss child abuse with colleagues. Interestingly, the only reported and/or suspected cases of sexual abuse came from the treatment group.

Training Teachers to Identify and Intervene with Abused Children

Over 788,000 cases of child abuse were reported in the United States in 1980 (American Humane Association, 1981). The actual incidence, however, is certainly much higher due to the small percentage of cases reported, suggesting that child abuse is a widespread community problem. Research has documented serious psychological consequences of child abuse including mental retardation, speech problems, extreme aggressive or withdrawn behaviors, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and increased potential to become an abusive parent. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for abusive parents to acknowledge their problems and seek therapeutic help voluntarily. Unless someone outside the family recognizes the problem and intervenes, many families do not receive services which could alter abusive patterns and prevent the negative effects of abuse on their children.

Because of their naturally occurring contact with almost all children, teachers are a potentially helpful resource for abused children. However, research suggests that many teachers receive minimal training in child abuse and therefore may hesitate to become involved because of lack of knowledge or emotional discomfort.

Two studies which surveyed colleges offering degrees in education found that only about two-thirds of the education programs included information on child abuse in the regular curriculum (Bartlett,1978;Education Commission of the States,1978). The mean time allotted to child abuse training ranged from 4.3 hours to 5.5 hours. The quality of the training offered was also questioned by the Education Commission of the States (1978) which found that only 57% of the teacher education administrators who responded to the questionnaire were aware of teachers' legal responsibility to report suspected abuse cases.

As a result of their minimal training in abuse, many teachers appear to lack knowledge about some important aspects of child abuse. Riggs and Evans (1978) found that most education students knew that abuse occurred in all socioeconomic classes, that abuse might occur in the context of physical discipline, and that abusive parents usually were abused as children. Pelcovitz (1978) reported that a majority of teachers knew that it was their responsibility to report suspected abuse cases. On the other hand, teachers apparently lack knowledge in several important areas. Riggs and Evans (1978) found that most education students did not know that disabled children were more likely to be abused or that teachers have legal immunity from suit based on their reports. Hazzard and Rupp (1983) found that teachers' scores on a child abuse knowledge scale were significantly lower than scores of pediatricians or mental health professionals, two other professional groups frequently involved in the identification of child abuse. A needs assessment conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children concluded that teachers need more information about risk factors, effects of abuse on academics and behavior, family dynamics and legal responsibilities (McCaffrey and Tewey, 1978).

Many teachers also appear to have strong negative feelings about child abuse and anxiety concerning their role in abuse cases. In a questionnaire study of four professional groups, Logan (1980) found that teachers rated 19 of 36 hypothetical abuse situations as more harmful than did the other professional groups. Similarly, Hazzard and Rupp (1983) found that teachers had stronger negative emotional reactions towards abusive adults and abused children in hypothetical vignettes than did pediatricians or mental health professionals. Lynch (1975) reported that many teachers were afraid of parental reprisal after a report of abuse or afraid of the legal system. McCaffrey and Tewey (1978)

concluded that often teachers felt uncomfortable talking with children or parents about abuse-related issues and felt confused about how to work with Protective Service agencies. In addition, Pelcovitz (1978) reported that teachers often felt unsupported by principals in dealing with abuse cases.

As a result of knowledge deficiencies and negative attitudes, one would expect that teachers would tend not to intervene as effectively as possible in abuse cases. The limited data available on actual teacher behavior tend to support this hypothesis. Although 42 states specifically mandate reporting of suspected child abuse cases by teachers or school personnel (Clearinghouse on Child Abuse Information, 1982), only 13% of child abuse reports are made by school personnel (American Humane Association, 1981).

A variety of written materials have been developed with the aim of increasing teachers' knowledge and ability to intervene effectively in child abuse cases (Broadhurst, 1979; Erickson, McEvoy, and Colucci, 1979; Fraser, 1979; Halperin, 1979; Riggs, 1982). In-service training programs about child abuse have also been developed and piloted (Broadhurst, 1977; Davis, Eckerman, and Jarvey, 1977; Francisco, 1980). Although evaluation components are mentioned in the descriptions of the above projects, only one teacher training study in the literature presents evaluation data. Krantz (1978) reported that following presentation of an instructional package on physical abuse, 80% of his subjects scored at least 80% correct on a knowledge post-test. However, Krantz's study is limited in several respects: 1) no control group is included, 2) his intervention focused on physical abuse only, and 3) his measures did not assess dimensions other than abuse-related knowledge (i.e. attitudes or behavior).

The current study is an evaluation of a fairly extensive child abuse training intervention for teachers, a six-hour workshop which covered all types of abuse. The experimental design includes a randomly selected control group and multi-faceted assessment of treatment effects including a 6-month follow-up measure of self-reported teacher behaviors related to child abuse.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 104 elementary and junior high teachers from two small cities in a county in the metro-Atlanta area. Teachers from one city were randomly assigned to the treatment condition (n=51) while teachers fromthe other city comprised the control group (n=53). Each condition included all fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers from four elementary schools and all health education teachers from two junior high schools. The workshop presenters offered to present the workshop free of charge if the county agreed to offer in-service credit and provide substitute teachers to enable participants to attend. This arrangement allowed 97% of the teachers in the designated schools to participate.

Procedure

Overview

All teachers anonymously completed a three-part questionnaire assessing demographic information, abuse-related knowledge, and emotional reactions to abuse. Approximately one week later, treatment teachers participated in a

six-hour workshop about child abuse. The next week, all teachers again completed the questionnaire (without the demographics section). Six months later, all teachers were asked to complete a measure assessing abuse-related behaviors during the preceeding six month period. Of the 104 original subjects, 97 subjects (93%) completed the follow-up measure; one subject had died, one had changed schools, and the remaining subjects did not return the questionnaires.

Intervention

Two identical workshops were conducted, each with approximately 25 participants. Each workshop was conducted by two mental health professionals (1 male, 1 female) with extensive experience with abusive families. Workshops included didactic presentations, small and large group discussions, videotape presentations, modeling and role-plays, and a question and answer period with representatives from the county Protective Services agency. Topics included: 1) rationale for training teachers about child abuse, 2) definitions, myths, and realities, 3) identification of abused children, 4) family dynamics, 5) personal concerns about dealing with abuse cases, 6) communication with an abused child, and 7) legal issues and social service referrals.

Measures

The development of the first three measures is described in more detail in Hazzard and Rupp (1983).

Background Information (pre)

This multiple-choice measure assesses demographic information (sex, age, marital status, parental status) and experiential variables (previous child abuse education, amount of previous professional work with child abuse cases, amount of personal contact with child abuse).

Knowledge About Child Abuse (pre,post)

This 34-item scale assesses knowledge about definitions, characteristics, causes, and effects of child abuse as well as reporting requirements and facts about treatment. The scale includes items related to abuse in general as well as items specifically concerning physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Subjects respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". For 16 items, "strongly agree" is the correct response and for 18 items, "strongly disagree" is correct. Each item is scored from 0 (incorrect) to 4 (correct) and total scores potentially range from 0 to 136. Coefficient alpha for the scale was .80.

Feelings About Child Abuse (pre,post)

This scale includes three vignettes representing typical cases of child neglect, sexual abuse, and physical abuse. After each vignette, subjects rate the parent in the vignette on six five-point scales which assess emotional reactions. Four scales represent primarily negative emotions (anger, disgust, sadness, discomfort) and two represent positive emotions (sympathy, caring). Subjects then rate the child in the vignette on the same six emotional scales. Scores are averaged across vignettes and across like-valence items to yield four summary scores for each subject: Negative Reaction to Parent, Positive Reaction to Parent, Negative Reaction to Child, and Positive Reaction to Child. Coefficient alphas for these scales were .90, .90, .93, and .90 respectively.

Reported Involvement in Child Abuse (follow-up)

Teachers are asked whether they engaged in seven activities related to child abuse in the preceding 6-month period. Potential activities include identifying a suspected case of abuse in the classroom, reporting a case of suspected abuse to Protective Services, talking to a child about suspected abuse, doing a class presentation about abuse, using corporal punishment with a

class member, discussing abuse with a friend or a collegue, and reading abuse-related materials.Teachers are also asked to provide free-response information concerning the suspected abuse cases with which they have been involved, perceived obstacles to their involvement, and perceived changes in their abuse-related knowledge, attitudes or actions.

Results

Analysis of demographic information yielded the following results. The median age category for the teachers was 31-35. Eighty-three percent were female and 17% were male. Sixty-two percent of the teachers were married, 27% were single, and 11% were separated, divorced, or widowed. Fifty-eight percent were parents.

In terms of previous education about child abuse, 24% of the teachers had no previous education, 44% had from 1 to 3 hours of previous education, 14% had from 4 to 6 hours, and 18% had 7 or more hours. With respect to professional experience with child abuse cases, 62% of the teachers had no prior experience, 31% had 1 to 5 hours of experience, and 7% had 6 or more hours of experience. Even fewer of the teachers had personal experience with child abuse. Seventy-seven percent reported no personal experience. Twenty-one percent reported that a "personal acquaintance" had been involved in child abuse and only 2% reported having had personal contact with abuse via "a close personal friend or own personal experience".

A 2x2 repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted to assess the impact of the workshop on teacher knowledge about abuse. Knowledge scores were the dependent variable with Treatment Condition serving as a between-subjects independent variable and Time serving as a within-subjects independent variable. The Condition X Time interaction was highly significant ($F(1,97)=17.5, p<.0001$).

As one can see by examining the mean scores in Table 1, treatment subjects' knowledge scores increased by over 10 points from pre to post testing while control subjects' scores remained virtually the same. (Table 1)

Four identical analyses were performed on the emotional reactions variables. The Condition X Time interaction was highly significant for the Positive Reaction to Parent variable ($F(1,97)=15.3$, $p<.0005$). Examination of the means in Table 1 reveals that treatment subjects became more positive from pre to post-testing whereas control subjects became slightly less positive. The Condition X Time interaction was also significant for the Positive Reaction to Child variable ($F(1,97)=5.77$, $p<.05$). The pattern of mean scores is identical for this variable, but the differences are smaller in magnitude. The Condition X Time interaction was nonsignificant for Negative Reaction to Parent; however, there was a significant Time main effect ($F(1,97)=9.98$, $p<.005$) as subjects in both conditions became less negative over time. Identical results were found with Negative Reaction to Child, although the Time main effect was less pronounced ($F(1,97)=4.42$, $p<.05$).

Chi square analyses contrasting treatment and control groups were performed on each of the seven variables on the fol'ow-up measure. The condition effect was significant for four variables. Treatment teachers were more likely than control teachers to have "talked to a child about events at home in an effort to determine whether abuse might be occurring" ($X^2(2)=8.40$, $p<.01$). Forty-eight percent of treatment teachers had talked to one or more children about family events compared to 22% of control teachers. Treatment teachers were also more likely than control teachers to have given a class presentation on child abuse during the preceeding six months ($X^2(1)=4.12$, $p<.05$). Forty-seven percent of the treatment teachers reported giving a class presentation as compared to 26% of the control teachers. Treatment teachers

were less likely to report administering corporal punishment to a class member than control teachers ($X^2(2)=5.88$, $p<.05$). None of the treatment teachers as compared to 12.5% of the control teachers reported administering corporal punishment. Finally, treatment teachers were more likely to "discuss child abuse with a friend or collegue" ($X^2(2)=11.1$, $p<.005$). Whereas 82% of treatment teachers reported discussing abuse, usually on more than one occasion, only 51% of control teachers reported such discussions.

There were no significant differences according to treatment condition in the number of children identified as suspected abuse cases or the number of cases actually reported to Protective Services. Eleven percent of treatment teachers reported one or more cases to Protective Services and 16% of control teachers made reports. There were also no differences between treatment and control teachers in the amount of written material on child abuse they reported reading during the preceding 6 months. Forty-six percent of treatment teachers and 39% of control teachers reported reading articles or books about child abuse for at least an hour.

Teachers' answers to the three free response questions were catagorized and frequency tables were constructed. The descriptions of abuse cases which were suspected and/or reported by control and treatment teachers were similar with one exception: no control teachers mentioned suspected sexual abuse whereas three treatment teachers did. Control and treatment teachers also agreed on several obstacles to reporting suspected abuse: teachers expressed a perceived need for more evidence before reporting, a perceived need to discuss the problem first with school officials before reporting, and a perception that school officials do not take action when requested to do so. Some differences in

perceived obstacles also emerged. Three control teachers felt that abuse was the parent's problem and not the teacher's responsibility; no treatment teachers expressed this view. However, a minority of treatment teachers continued to express fears which interfered with their involvement in abuse cases: two feared losing their jobs and one expressed fear of the abusive parent. Finally, treatment teachers described a variety of ways in which they themselves perceived their abuse-related knowledge, attitudes or behavior to have changed. The most common reported changes, in order of decreasing frequency were: teachers felt more aware of the problem of child abuse, more knowledgeable about abuse, more sympathetic to abusive parents, more observant of evidence of abuse, and more sensitive to children.

Discussion

The teacher training workshops on abuse appeared successful in a number of ways. First, teachers who attended the workshops increased their scores on the Knowledge Scale and also perceived themselves as more knowledgeable, as reflected by their free response data. The free response data also suggests that treatment teachers may have increased their knowledge about sexual abuse in particular, an area which has generally not been included in previous training programs on abuse.

In terms of emotional reactions, all teachers continued to have primarily negative feelings of anger, disgust, sadness and/or discomfort when they "think of" an abusive parent and to a lesser degree when they "think of" an abused child. The negative emotional reactions to the parent are not unexpected or inappropriate, but the negative reactions to the child are somewhat surprising.

These questions used a vignette format in an effort to capture how a teacher might feel when interacting with an abused child; it appears that negative reactions toward the parent or the abusive situation may spill over and affect how the teacher "thinks of" the child. This result seems to accurately reflect a phenomenon several teachers reported to us: "It's hard for me to talk to [the child] about abuse because I just get so upset".

While the workshop did not significantly change teachers' negative emotional reactions, it did increase teachers' positive feeling of sympathy and caring towards abusive parents and to a lesser degree towards abused children. The significant results on the positive reactions scales were also supported by teacher free response data about self-perceived changes in attitude. For example, one teacher wrote "I understand better why abusive parents act the way they do and I feel sorry for them, not only their child". Thus, the workshop achieved the goal of increasing teachers' empathy for abusive parents, hopefully increasing their ability to communicate with those parents in a helpful and effective, rather than punitive, manner.

Finally, treatment teachers appear to have changed several important aspects of their behavior during the six-month period following the workshop. Since practical considerations dictated the use of self-report data, we attempted to make items behaviorally specific in order to minimize social desirability response bias.

First, treatment teachers appeared to intervene more with children in two ways: by talking with children about events at home and by discussing child abuse with the entire class. There was no difference between conditions in the number of cases of abuse which were actually identified or reported. From examination of the free response descriptions of cases, our impression was that the most obvious and serious cases of abuse were reported to Protective

Services. This may be a generally appropriate way for the school system to interact with Protective Services, as the agency would have great difficulty handling the workload which would result if all cases of abuse were reported. Thus, the workshop appeared to make teachers aware of ways they might provide preventive and supportive services, such as individual and class discussions. Hopefully, these early interventions may prevent more serious and reportable abuse from occuring.

A second behavioral effect of the workshop was to eliminate treatment teachers' use of corporal punishment. This effect is particularly interesting as the issue of corporal punishment in the classroom was never directly addressed in the workshop. Apparently, in the context of considering the impact of parents' excessive use of physical punishment on a child (eg. decreased self-esteem, or learning that violence is a way to solve problems), teachers independently concluded that alternative methods of classroom discipline were preferable or more humane.

Finally, treatment teachers reported discussing child abuse more frequently with friends and colleagues. Since perceived lack of school system support was a frequently cited obstacle to teacher involvement in abuse cases, development of an informal support network within schools was a major workshop goal. Teachers are more likely to become involved in potential abuse cases if they can utilize colleagues to provide emotional support and to offer suggestions about indicators of abuse or possible courses of action.

In summary, the teacher training workshop resulted in: 1) increased knowledge about abuse, 2) increased empathy for abusive parents, 3) increased class and individual discussion with students about potential abuse, 4) decreased use of physical punishment in the classroom and, 5) increased discussion of abuse with a support system of friends or colleagues. It seemed that teachers who participated in the workshop began to view child abuse as a community problem and become more willing as community members to take action to help alleviate the problem. Similar interventions for other community groups need to be developed, evaluated, and implemented in order to significantly reduce the incidence of child abuse and prevent its tragic consequences.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Knowledge and Emotional Reactions Scales

	Condition	
Measure	Treatment	Control
Pre Knowledge	92.2 (12.4)	92.7 (11.5)
Post Knowledge	102.4 (12.1)	92.4 (16.2)
Pre Positive -Parent	2.75 (.86)	2.73 (.73)
Post Positive-Parent	3.17 (.84)	2.62 (.84)
Pre Positive-Child	4.67 (.48)	4.63 (.50)
Post Positive-Child	4.73 (.45)	4.50 (.64)
Pre Negative-Parent	3.96 (.69)	3.95 (.64)
Post Negative-Parent	3.77 (.76)	3.76 (.73)
Pre Negative-Child	3.74 (.90)	3.47 (.78)
Post Negative-Child	3.53 (.97)	3.39 (.87)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

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Footnotes

1 This research was supported by a grant from Emory University Research Fund to the author. The workshops were supported by grants from the following institutions to the Bridge Family Center of Atlanta, Inc.: McDonald Foundation, Atlanta Foundation, Metropolitan Atlanta Foundation, Ray and Elizabeth Lee Foundation, Gay and Erskine Love Foundation, James Starr Memorial Foundation, Inc., Shearson-American Express, and American Tara Corporation. The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of John Alderson, M.Ed., Marion Roberts, MSW, and Gary Rupp, M.Ed..